

Report of Local Assessments of General Education
East Tennessee State University, 2002-2003

June 17, 2003

Proposed Local Assessment Activities, 2002-03

In its proposal for local assessment activities for 2000-05, ETSU established the following objectives for 2002-03:

1. Review syllabi of courses declared proficiency-intensive 1996-97, 1999-2000.
2. Continue ongoing assessment of oral communication skills of seniors participating in community-based learning experiences (e.g., student teaching, clinical practica, internships).
3. Implement cyclic assessment of seniors' skills in one of the following areas: oral communication, writing and using information technology.

The university accomplished all of these objectives. Actions regarding each objective are summarized below.

Local Assessment Accomplishments, 2002-03

1. Review syllabi of courses declared proficiency-intensive 1996-97, 1999-2000

The Directors of ETSU's Oral Communication, Using Information Technology, and Writing Proficiency Programs led their committees in reviewing syllabi of the designated courses. The committees reviewed syllabi representing 180 course sections in 2002-03. The review found that 152 sections met all criteria for proficiency-intensive courses. The directors contacted faculty whose syllabi did not meet all criteria to inform them of needs for improvement. In virtually all cases, instructors gladly agreed to remedy the situation the next time they teach these courses.

2. Continue ongoing assessment of oral communication skills of seniors participating in community-based learning experiences (e.g., student teaching, clinical practica, internships)

During academic year 2003-03 the College of Education conducted assessments of the oral communication skills of students participating in community-based, professional learning experiences. Mentors evaluated the communication skills of student teachers, resulting in up to four assessments per student.

3. Implement cyclic assessment of seniors' skills in one of the following areas: oral communication, writing and using information technology

During AY 2001-02 ETSU administered the Academic Profile essay exam to a sample of 200 seniors as an assessment of senior students' writing skills. In 2002-2003 our Writing Proficiency Committee conducted an analysis of the Educational Testing Service (ETS) data, as well as a follow up analysis of all student essays that were rated 2 by the ETS scorer. The result was an

exceptionally thorough analysis of our students' writing skills. A copy of the Writing Proficiency Committee's report is attached.

Institutional Responses to Local Assessment Findings, 2002-03

In 2002-03 ETSU took the following steps to respond to recent local assessments of general education:

Improving students' writing skills

The analysis of Academic Profile essay exams by our Writing Proficiency Committee revealed several ways in which ETSU could help students improve their writing skills. The committee's report recommended conducting faculty development workshops to inform faculty about the assessment findings and to discuss useful teaching methods (See attachment). In April 2003 the Director of the Writing Proficiency Program conducted the first such workshop, which was conducted for instructors of ENGL 1010 and 1020, ETSU's freshman composition series. Seventeen faculty members attended. In 2003-04 the Director will conduct similar workshops for faculty across the campus who teach writing-intensive courses.

Improving students' oral grammar skills

A 2001-02 survey of ETSU faculty teaching oral communication-intensive courses indicated that a significant number of our students would benefit from improving their oral grammar skills. Assessments of the communication skills of seniors participating in community-based learning experiences yielded similar findings. In 2002-03 the Director of ETSU's Writing and Communication Center led focus group discussions with students and faculty to determine the most appropriate ways to address these findings. These discussions were especially important because oral grammar can be a culturally sensitive topic. The focus groups indicated that some action to assist students in improving their oral grammar skills would be welcome. As a first step, in May 2003 the Writing and Communication Center conducted a faculty workshop on enhancing students' oral communication skills, including oral grammar. The center will repeat the workshop in the future, and it will explore other ways of addressing the topic.

An Analysis of Academic Profile Essay Test Results: East Tennessee State University, 2001-2002

Submitted by

Dr. Jeff Powers-Beck
Director, ETSU Writing Proficiency Program

February 8, 2002

University Writing Committee

Ed Barylá

Alison Deadman

Patricia Hayes

Gary Henson

Anne Koehler

Marie Jones

Eric Mustain

Kevin O'Donnell

Leslie Perry

Jeff Powers-Beck

Rob Russell

Methodology

During the 2001-2002 academic year, for the purpose of assessing directly the writing skills of ETSU students approaching graduation, a randomly chosen sample of 200 students scheduled to take the core exit exam was selected to complete the Academic Profile Essay Exam. This test offered students the choice of three topics: a Natural Science topic, a Social Science topic, and a Humanities topic. For each topic, students were asked to comprehend a difficult quotation and to write an expository essay on the subject using examples from their course work.

Results

The essays were graded according to standardized grading criteria by a scorer at ETS, on a 1-4 scale, 4 being the best score.

Academic Profile Essay Results
East Tennessee State University, 2000-2001

Score	Number of Essays	Percentage	Definition of Score
4	36/200	18%	"a level of writing skill that supports and enhances the discussion"
3	75/200	37.5%	"a level of writing skill that does not interfere with the conveying of information"
2	81/200	40.5%	problematic and superficial essays, which are often underdeveloped, and often "fail to address the [writing] task"
1	8/200	4%	"writing deficiencies so severe that the essay does not convey information"

According to ETS scoring standards, the exam results indicate that 18% of the writers demonstrated, "a level of writing skill that supports and enhances the discussion" of their ideas; that 37.5% of the writers demonstrated "a level of writing skill that does not interfere with the conveying of information"; and that 4% of the writers displayed "writing deficiencies so severe that the essay does not convey information." In summary terms, one can conclude that about one-fifth of the writers exhibited superior college-level writing; that more than one-third displayed competent college-level writing skills; and that less than one in twenty showed severe writing skills problems. But such a summary of the scoring results is incomplete, as it fails to evaluate the writing skills of the largest group of writers, the 40% with scores of 2.

The Problem of Level-2 Scores

According to the ETS standards, a Level-2 score on the Academic Profile Essay does not designate a certain level of writing skill, but rather indicates an essay that is too brief, superficial, or that fails to address the writing task. While some of the writers of these essays displayed significant writing skills problems, others manifested no such deficiencies. Indeed, the written comments of the ETS scorer indicate that the Level-2 scores comprise students of varying abilities. The scorer comments upon one exam: "Displays a disjointed level of writing, not quite up to the level 3 or 4 paper," but then upon another, "This essay started off so well, excellent

writing skills, vocabulary and insights,” and upon another, “Writing skills were clear and strong.” The wide range of writing skills represented by Level-2 scores was also noted by members of the University Writing Committee who reviewed the exams. One member responded to a Level-2 essay, “The writing [in this essay] is generally pretty competent,” while another member commented upon reading a group of Level-2 essays, “Overall impression of these #2 score essays is very disappointing. Glaring evidence of significant grammar and organizational problems.”

Since more students received Level-2 scores than any other score on the ETS exam (81 out of 200, or 40.5%), it is important to ask: “What is the meaning of a score of 2”? What does the large number of 2 scores say about the writing abilities of ETSU students approaching graduation? And how can the problems of these writers be addressed by ETSU programs?

Evaluation of Level-2 Scores

In order to answer these questions, the University Writing Committee set out to evaluate 50 of the 81 essays with Level-2 scores (randomly chosen) and analyze the writing problems that these students typically exhibited. Eleven members of the committee were each charged with completing an evaluation form for a subset of essays, checking the ETS scoring, recording writing problems in the essays, and recommending solutions for the students’ writing problems. For purposes of comparison, the ETS scorer’s evaluation checksheets and written comments for these 50 exams were also recorded for analysis.

Review of ETS Scoring

A single scorer from ETS scored all 200 Academic Profile Essays per ETS scoring standards. With a small group of exceptions (6 out of 50 essays), the University Writing Committee concurred with the ETS scorer. The comments of the committee frequently echoed the ETS scorer’s concerns about lack of development, insufficient examples, and poorly chosen examples. In four of the six cases in which committee members disagreed with the ETS scorer, they felt the appropriate score for the essay was 1. The committee concluded, therefore, that the essays were generally well scored, but that the ETS scorer was reluctant to score essays as 1, and that another scoring might have produced a small number of additional 1 scores. Several committee members also expressed a strong belief that an apparent lack of motivation in students writing the essays may have resulted in the high number of Level-2 scores. There was, however, no way to measure this factor.

Student Writing Problems

The University Writing Committee members made 125 total comments upon writing problems in the group of 50 Level-2 essays. These 125 writing problems can be divided roughly into three groups: Critical Reading (i.e., Reading Comprehension and Critical Thinking); Invention, Development, and Evidence Problems; and Grammar, Sentence, and Editing Problems.

Analysis of Writing Problems in Level-2 Academic Profile Essays
East Tennessee State University, 2001-2002

Kind of Problem	Number of Comments (N = 125)	Percentage of All Comments
Critical Reading	30	24%
Invention, Development and Evidence	64	51%
Grammar, Sentence, and Editing	31	25%

Writing problems in the Level-2 essays appear to have begun with the students' reading of the essay topics, as evaluators frequently noted that the essay quotations were interpreted superficially or misunderstood by the essay writers (24% of the writing problems). Grammar, syntax, phrasing, and editing problems were also a significant concern of the faculty evaluators (25% of the writing problems), and they specified misuse of words, awkward phrasing, colloquial expressions, redundancies, and incomplete sentences among these problems. The largest single class of writing problems in the Level-2 essays, however, was in invention, organization, and development of essay ideas (64 comments, 51% of the writing problems). The ETS scorer and the faculty evaluators concurred that these difficulties in generating and organizing ideas and in providing relevant examples were the chief problems in the Level-2 essays.

Recommended Actions

How can we use this assessment data to improve student writing at ETSU? The evaluation of the Level-2 essays suggests that students can benefit from further critical thinking and close-reading practice with complex reading passages in their disciplines. It also suggests that students can benefit from understanding writing as a multi-step process, from using invention and organizational strategies in the pre-drafting stage of the process, and from using revision strategies in the post-drafting stage. With these conclusions in mind, the ETSU Writing Program now proposes the following three steps: conduct faculty development workshops; create a faculty manual designed to enhance teaching of these writing skills; and assess student writing again with the Academic Profile Essay Exam.

1. Conduct Faculty Development Workshops

An initial workshop, in April of 2003, will focus on informing adjunct instructors and teaching assistants in the Department of English about the stages in the writing process and the benefits of teaching invention and revision strategies to student writers. Further workshops during the 2003-2004 academic year will be addressed to faculty members throughout the university who teach Writing-Intensive courses.

2. Create a Faculty Writing Manual

In the Fall of 2003, the University Writing Committee will begin to create a manual (*Teaching Writing at ETSU*) designed to share faculty ideas for teaching writing, with special emphasis on

teaching the writing process, critical reading, and invention strategies. This manual will be completed by the Summer of 2004, when it will be distributed to faculty members teaching Writing-Intensive courses.

3. Repeat Student Writing Assessment

In order to assess the effectiveness of these measures and of the ETSU writing program, the Academic Profile Essay will be given again to a sample of graduating students in the 2004-2005 academic year.